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ABSTRACT

This report, the sixth in a series developed by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) examining the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act 2001, discusses Reading First, which replaces the Reading Excellence Act. The report states that Reading First, a voluntary program, aims at having all children achieve reading proficiency by the end of the third grade and is designed to help states, districts, and communities identify and adopt scientifically based reading programs, and ensure that all classroom teachers (kindergarten through third grade) can identify children at risk of reading failure and provide effective early instruction. It explains that Early Reading First, a related program, is designed to promote reading readiness in preschool-age children before primary school entry. The report is divided into the following sections: Background and Research on Literacy; Reading First; Definition of Scientifically Based Reading Research; Reading First--Implications for States; Policy Questions--Reading First; Early Reading First; and Early Reading First--Implications for the States. Contains links to Web sources. (NKA)

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No Child Left Behind Policy Brief
Literacy

By Kristie Kauerz

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NCLB POLICY BRIEF

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No Child Left Behind Policy Brief

Literacy

By Kristie Kauerz

This is the sixth in a series of ECS reports examining the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the newly revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act on state policy and policymaking. Other reports will focus on accountability, leadership, school choice, state information systems and teaching quality.

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The newly revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act authorizes a total of $975 million for two initiatives – Reading First and Early Reading First – aimed at having all children achieve reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade. Both are voluntary programs to help states and local education agencies utilize scientifically based reading research to improve reading instruction for young children.

Reading First, which replaces the Reading Excellence Act, is designed to help states, districts and communities identify and adopt scientifically based reading programs, and ensure all classroom teachers (kindergarten through 3rd grade) can identify children at risk of reading failure and provide effective early instruction. Early Reading First is designed to promote reading readiness in preschool-age children, before they enter K-3 classrooms.

Background and Research on Literacy

Learning to read is an essential foundation for success in our society. Research by the National Research Council clearly shows that the process of learning to read is lengthy and begins early in life. Research further reveals that children who are not proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade have difficulties throughout the course of their schooling, perform poorly in other subjects and are less likely to graduate from high school. In today's fast-paced technological society, higher literacy has become a near imperative and increasingly serious consequences await those children who fall behind.

There are no easy answers or quick solutions for optimizing reading achievement. Nonetheless, the knowledge and practices exist to teach all but a small percentage of students to read. Research has now identified the core, critical skills that young students need to become good readers. According to the National Reading Panel, the five scientifically based essential components of effective reading instruction include:

1. **Phonemic awareness** – the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sounds, called phonemes, in spoken words.
2. **Phonics** – the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes and graphemes, the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language.
3. **Vocabulary development** – the development of stored information about the meanings and pronunciation of words necessary for communication.
4. **Reading fluency, including oral reading skills** – the ability to read text accurately and quickly, thereby providing a bridge between word recognition and comprehension.
5. **Reading comprehension strategies** – the ability to understand, remember and communicate with others about what has been read.

Although science has now identified the core elements of effective reading instruction, these core elements have yet to be integrated into schools on a consistent basis. While American schools have improved over the last 50 years, a large gap between the educa-

tional haves and have-nots still exists. Schools in some districts have embraced and implemented research-based reading programs and instructional practices. Many others have not. Some teachers are highly knowledgeable and are provided ongoing professional development and support to become excellent reading instructors. Many others are not. The new ESEA offers an opportunity to address these gaps by providing federal financial resources that can allow states to take advantage of the current scientific consensus regarding what it takes to teach all children to read by the end of 3rd grade.

Reading First

Reading First focuses on improving literacy and reading instruction in the early elementary classroom. To this end, the program seeks to embed the essential components of scientifically based reading instruction into all elements of early elementary (K-3) teaching so that every student can read at grade level or above by the end of 3rd grade.

Reading First funds are targeted to improve professional development and support to teachers, including special education teachers, in order to develop the skills needed to effectively teach reading. In addition, the program provides assistance to states and districts to help prepare classroom teachers to screen and identify reading barriers, and to help students overcome their reading difficulties.

Reading First also seeks to strengthen coordination and consistency among all state reading programs by requiring each participating state to convene Reading Leadership Teams. These teams are designed not only to direct the development of Reading First plans, but also to build on and promote coordination among literacy programs in the state. The Leadership Team must include the governor, the chief state school officer, ranking members of legislative education committees, state directors of federal- and state-funded reading programs, and representatives of local education agencies, community-based organizations, teachers and parents.

How Reading First Differs from Past Federal Literacy Programs

Reading First differs from previous national reading programs in several key respects. First, while both Reading First and the Reading Excellence Act allow for the expansion of family literacy and volunteer tutor programs, Reading First is more heavily focused on improving classroom teachers' instruction skills with emphasis on consistent and coherent reading instruction for all children. Second, all states are eligible to apply for Reading First funds, which will be distributed using a standard formula. Previous programs distributed funds on a competitive basis, which excluded some states. Third, since classroom instructional decisions must be informed by scientifically based reading research, Reading First establishes clear, specific expectations for what can and should happen in classrooms. Previous national reading programs, while requiring use of scientifically based reading programs, did not explicitly outline expectations for classroom-based assessment and instruction.

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Definition of Scientifically Based Reading Research

Implementation of Reading First requires a clear understanding of what constitutes "scientifically based reading research." The U.S. Department of Education's April 2002 final *Guidance for the Reading First Program* offers a concise definition of what "scientifically based reading research" means and also provides a number of clarifying questions for policymakers to consider. According to the department, scientifically based research:

- Employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment.
  - Clarifying questions: Does the work have a solid theoretical or research foundation? Was it carefully designed to avoid biased findings and unwarranted claims of effectiveness? Does the research clearly delineate how it was conducted, by whom it was conducted, and on whom it was conducted?
- Involves rigorous data analyses adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn.
  - Clarifying questions: Was the research designed to minimize alternative explanations for observed effects? Are the observed effects consistent with the overall conclusions and claims of effectiveness? Does the research make clear what populations were studied and does it describe to whom the findings can be generalized? Does the study provide a full description of the outcomes measures?
- Relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators and observers, and across multiple measurements and observations.
  - Clarifying questions: Are the data based on a single-investigator, single-classroom study, or did multiple investigators in numerous locations collect similar data? What procedures were in place to minimize researcher bias? Are the study interventions described in sufficient detail to allow for replicability? Does the research explain how instructional fidelity was ensured and assessed?
- Has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective and scientific review.
  - Clarifying questions: Has the research been carefully reviewed by unbiased individuals who were not part of the research study? Have the findings been subjected to external scrutiny and verification?

Funding Under Reading First

For fiscal year 2002, Congress authorized $900 million for Reading First. Subject to sufficient future appropriations, grants will be available to state education agencies for a six-year period. Reading First provides specified activities for education policymakers at the federal, state and district levels.

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Federal Activities and Use of Funds

At the national level, the U.S. Department of Education may use $27.5 million of the total authorization for activities, including an independent, five-year external evaluation of Reading First. In addition, the department will provide technical assistance to states and districts and will disseminate information about effective Reading First projects shown to improve reading instruction and student achievement.

State Activities and Use of Funds

The remaining authorized Reading First funds – $872.5 million – will be awarded to state education agencies through a formula grant process based on the number of children, aged 5-17, within each state who are from families with incomes below the federal poverty line. The department anticipates applications for Reading First funds from the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the four U.S. territories. A state's failure to participate in Reading First will not have any effect on its receipt of other federal resources.

Although the vast majority (at least 80%) of Reading First dollars will be awarded to districts, state education agencies will have a significant amount of funds available to provide statewide leadership, technical assistance and professional development in the application and expansion of scientifically based reading research to improve reading instruction. Specifically, states will:

- Identify reading assessments, materials and programs with proven validity and reliability
- Ensure professional development activities help teachers to implement the essential components of reading and are founded on scientifically based reading research
- Design and implement a competitive grant process for local education agencies.

Local Activities and Use of Funds

The state must subgrant, via a competitive process, at least 80% of its total Reading First award to eligible local education agencies (LEAs). In making awards, state agencies must give priority to LEAs that have a large number of children from families with incomes below the federal poverty line or that have a high percentage of K-3 students reading below grade level. Local applications must demonstrate how the LEA will implement reading programs using scientifically based research, instructional reading assessments and provide professional development that is clearly aligned with the instructional program for K-3 teachers.

Reading First – Implications for States

In May 2002, ECS conducted a comprehensive review of state reading and literacy programs. This effort provided the most up-to-date information available on literacy programs across the 50 states and four territories. Most states do not currently require LEAs and schools to explicitly and solely use "scientifically based" reading programs. At least half of the 50 states encourage the use of research-based curricula and instructional

strategies. In most cases, however, such guidelines apply to only a limited number of reading programs and are not universally applied to all districts and schools in the state. Little more than one-third of the states use research-based reading strategies as part of their teacher preparation and/or professional development initiatives.

Even fewer states have adopted a comprehensive reading policy that includes curriculum, assessment, teacher preparation and development, intervention, reporting, accountability and a state-level leadership body. States such as Alabama and Florida have comprehensive reading policies, but they are being implemented in demonstration sites only. Other states, including California, Idaho, Texas and Vermont, are moving toward a unified policy to address literacy for children in grades K-3. No state yet has a state-level body similar to the required Reading Leadership Team outlined in ESEA 2001.

Clearly then, Reading First presents a significant opportunity for states to expand, coordinate and in some cases initiate, research-based reading programs to teach all children to read by the end of 3rd grade. States that have received grants under the Reading Excellence Act over the past three years are further along in integrating scientifically based reading research into teachers' professional development and classroom practices. Other states will need to institute new policies that clearly promote and embed a dedication to effective, research-based reading materials and instruction. To aid states in instituting such new policies, ESEA 2001 provides for the establishment of Reading Leadership Teams and also allows considerable flexibility in establishing a competitive preference for scientifically based reading materials and programs that the state determines are effective.

Policy Questions – Reading First

When crafting Reading First plans and establishing policy for children's reading success in grades K-3, policymakers should consider the following questions:

- How will your state help districts and schools determine if reading programs meet the "scientifically based" criteria required by ESEA 2001?
- How will your state enforce the adoption and use of programs based on scientific reading research?
- What evaluation and reporting requirements will your state put in place to make sure the programs are improving reading achievement?
- How will your state provide comprehensive, objective information about reading programs to districts, schools and teachers?
- How will your state ensure that teacher preparation and professional development programs adequately equip teachers to use research-based materials and instructional practices?
- How can your state use the Reading First Initiative to develop or strengthen a comprehensive reading policy for all students?

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Early Reading First

ESEA 2001 recognizes that many children enter school without the necessary pre-literacy skills they will need to benefit fully from formal K-3 reading instruction. The act therefore authorizes $75 million for Early Reading First grants to promote reading readiness in pre-school-age children, particularly those from low-income families. Encouraging linkages between early education programs and the primary grades, ESEA 2001 requires that LEAs receiving both Reading First and Early Reading First grants align the programs so there is continuity in teaching young children to read between preschool and kindergarten through 3rd grade.

The grants, which are to be awarded on a competitive basis, are specifically intended to: (1) create language and literacy-rich environments in early childhood programs; (2) identify and provide early language and literacy activities and instructional materials; (3) provide early language and literacy screening assessments; and (4) provide professional development opportunities for early childhood educators in emerging literacy concepts, materials and instruction. As with Reading First, all Early Reading First activities must be based on scientifically based early language and literacy development research.

Early Reading First – Implications for States

Currently, no state has explicit and comprehensive policies for literacy development in preschool-age children. States can therefore use Early Reading First as an opportunity to begin defining, disseminating and, in limited scope, implementing scientifically based literacy materials and programs for very young children. These efforts should be integrated with and strengthen existing early care and education efforts in states.

Local education agencies and community-based organizations serving preschool-age children may apply for Early Reading First grants. Because these funds are based on a competitive process, funds will be concentrated on a limited number of states and will impact only a limited number of early childhood programs. Carefully designed emerging literacy programs, however, can serve as models for other states and districts to use in creating new programs on their own.

Policy Questions – Early Reading First

- How will your state determine whether early learning programs, materials and professional development activities meet the "scientifically based" criteria required by ESEA 2001?
- What efforts are being made in your state to introduce and integrate scientifically based reading research and early literacy programs in preschools, Head Start programs, child care centers and child care homes?
- Does your state provide early childhood professional development opportunities that promote an understanding of language and literacy development in preschool-age children?

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- How is your state measuring the quality of early care and education environments, particularly in terms of language and literacy development?
- Which communities in your state would benefit most from concentrated early literacy efforts?
- How can your state support school districts and communities in applying for Early Reading First grants?

Links to Sources

America Federation for Teachers (1999). *Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do*
http://www.aft.org/edissues/downloads/rocketsci.pdf

Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement
http://www.ciera.org/

ECS Issue Site on Reading/Literacy
http://www.ecs.org/ReadingLiteracy

Learning First Alliance (2000). *Every Child Reading: A Professional Development Guide*
http://www.learningfirst.org/readingguide.html

National Association for the Education of Young Children
http://www.naeyc org/childrens_champions/federal.htm

National Reading Panel
http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/default.htm

U.S. Department of Education - Early Reading First
http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/earlyreading/

U.S. Department of Education - Reading First
http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/readingfirst/

Visit the ECS ESEA Web site at
www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/special/ESEA_main.htm

***Also watch for ECS' interactive, online 50-state database of literacy programs. The database will be available on the ECS Web site by May 18, 2002.

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This *Brief* was written by **Kristie Kauerz,** program director, Early Childhood, Education Commission of the States.

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